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ABSTRACT

It is essential that language arts students in teacher education programs learn more than just facts about language, such as grammar, dialect, and so on. Future teachers must be taught how language, especially the child's language, affects the teacher, the child, and the child's achievement in school. These prospective teachers should learn what cultural differences to expect and how to analyze cultural data concerning environment, nonverbal communication, family structure and relationships, and community structure and relationships. Dialect should then be studied, as dialect can affect a child's reading progress if the teacher is not aware of dialect features or the relationships among all American English dialects. Finally, to put this information in perspective, future teachers should study native-language acquisition. (JM)

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ON TEACHING THE LANGUAGE ARTS TO CULTURALLY AND DIALECTALLY DIFFERENT CHILDREN: TEACHING THE TEACHER FIRST

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We in Teacher Education are not primarily concerned with the college student as a student per se, but as a future teacher, for we have ample evidence that it is the teacher who is the most potent variable in any classroom. Therefore, we must first and foremost consider what we want a teacher to do and to be; we must establish acceptable standards for human inter-relationships between teachers and students; and our requirements for certification must then reflect our best judgments. In essence, this means that we must view our role quite differently than, say, professors of liberal arts who concern themselves with how much a degree candidate knows. We too are concerned with accumulated knowledge but also with how that knowledge will be used. The former is the requirement for a degree; the latter is the requirement for a teaching certificate.

The area of language education is a particular case in point. We are able to teach the facts about language (grammar, dialect, etc.) but do not, I feel, adequately teach our students how language, particularly the child's language, affects the teacher, the child and the child's achievement in school. I would contend that we are teaching the knowledge for the degree, but not the insight into the knowledge, a requisite for the certificate.

It is not realistic to talk about a total reformation of our curricula; therefore, I shall take a more moderate position. I'll assume that the students take the usual courses in teacher preparation and have field experiences. What

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I propose is designed to complement and supplement the curriculum, providing knowledge about children who do not come from the teacher's cultural or dialectal background and insight into how this knowledge can be best used.

Before proceding any further, it is necessary to understand the presumption behind that which I will propose. An analysis of any group of people will yield both cultural and dialectal differences, yet these differences are almost always very small in number; the subgroups will be overwhelmingly alike. Therefore, to separate any culturally different group from all other groups can lead to gross and wrong overgeneralizations. The same is true for dialectal differences. We can specify the linguistic features which distinguish the sub-groups, but the language of all of the sub-groups will be much more alike than different. Consequently, dialect labels (e.g. Black English or Southern Non-Standard) often lead to faulty generalizations. Black English is not Black; it is a dialect which anyone may speak. My ability to speak it is not related to my race just as my living in Massachusetts is not related to my dialect. Unfortunately, too many people (including teachers) do not realize this and erroneously assume all Blacks speak Black English or all Southerners speak Southern English, or all people from Massachusetts will sound like Ted Kennedy.

The first components to be taught should be the analysis of cultural differences. The culture a student comes from certainly affects academic progress from two standpoints: (1) From the student's standpoint, the experiential knowledge he or she has is largely culture bound, for the reinforcement the student gets outside of school is largely dependent upon that value system. (2) From the teacher's standpoint, each teacher's reactions to any culture conflicts are related to that teacher's culture and knowledge of other cultures, and his or her ability to relate to or predicate materials on what the student knows is also based on knowledge of cultures.

Therefore, it is essential that the teacher know what cultural differences to expect, for teaching is facilitated by building on what the student already knows rather than by introducing entirely foreign concepts, i.e. future teachers' lack of knowledge of various cultures.

There are four areas in which course materials should be developed. The first area would be the physical description of the environment. We are all aware of the gross differences between the inner city and the suburbs or between Miami and Seattle, but there are equally important subtle differences which go unnoticed. For example, in many inner city areas there are small corner grocery stores while the suburbs have large shopping centers. Or, in Michigan, farmers would be more apt to put their cows in the barn than their horses, but in West Texas, the reverse would be true.

The second area is non-verbal communication. Not only do gestures people use vary from community to community, so may the means of expressing emotions. Hitting a friend on the shoulder would show the closeness you feel, but to someone from another group this would be interpreted as agression.

The third area concerns family structure and relationships. The child with one parent often has a different concept of the relationship between parent and child, but we should also teach our students about the various cultural attitudes toward "mother" and "father" for these are not constant across cultures. Our students should also learn that parental roles vary, and thus the child's concepts will vary. One of my students gave me a precise example of this role-concept variance. Her brother and his wife both work; consequently, they share the housekeeping duties. His domain is the kitchen. Their child obviously learned that "daddy" equals "cook and dishwasher". When that child first encountered one of her friend's mothers cooking and dishwashing, she assumed that the friend's family was strange. Later, after only a short time in school, the teacher's refusal to accept this interpretation led her to become ashamed of her parents. She thought they were the wierd ones.

The fourth area concerns community structure and relationships. Communities differ in the amount of community identification, in political structure, in religion, and in socio-economic class inclusion. The speech of the pupil will reflect these structures and relationships. Two decades ago, when most teachers taught in the communities in which they grew up, this posed no problem. The teacher knew the community and its people. However, teachers now are more mobile, and thus they must be able to analyze the backgrounds of students from many communities in order to preclude the faux pas which might hinder their effectiveness. This is particularly important in cities where busing is the means of integration or in multi-ethnic areas.

Since it would be impossible to present future teachers all possible cultural differences, it is more important to use the known differences to teach them what to look for and how to analyze cultural data, then to concentrate on how to react to cultural differences.

Once the concept of culture and cultural difference is explored, the future teacher should begin studying dialect. The dialect one speaks is a product of and is relevant to one's culture. Therefore, what one learns about cultural analysis can be used in dialect analysis -- and vice-versa. But, dialect by itself does not directly affect learning or reading. Indeed, my own research and many others' indicate that dialect has little or no effect on reading comprehension, but the reaction to or attitude about dialect (i.e. someone else's dialect) does have a great affect. This is not terribly surprising because our written language is no longer related to any one dialect. Indeed, no one speaks "written English". However, dialect, as a shadow of culture, can affect reading progress if the teacher doesn't know the features of the dialect or how all American English dialects are related. Therefore, we need to instruct future teachers in the dual reality of dialect.

In the linguistic reality, dialects are defined by features, not by where you live, your SES, or your sex. In this reality, dialect determination is based on objective reality -- your speech determines which dialect group(s) you fit in. e.g. I live in Massachusetts, but my speech doesn't fit the area. You have to test me to discover what my dialect group is -- you can't assume it.

The psychological reality, which is the more important for teachers to know, is based on generalizations of what you have previously encountered, and it usually goes beyond linguistic realities. It is affected by and affects the way you feel about my supposed group. The linguistic reality can be taught. We can teach what makes a dealect and how it can change. Certainly we can teach the differences between dialects. Teaching and testing even use the same procedure: given a list of phonological and lexical potential differences, the student analyses the data. This is not as difficult as it sounds, for there are very few differences among American English dialects. The psychological realities can also be taught. We can teach the common stereotypes and the bases for stereotypes. More importantly, we can even teach stereotypes. These can be readily tested using both attitude scales (semantic differentials are on type) and clinical observation. Furthermore, once we know the future teacher's psychological realities, we can set about changing them, with considerable success.

Finally, to put this information into perspective each future teacher should receive a dose of information on native language acquistion. Specifically:

(1) An overview of the stages of acquisition to show that dialect and culture do not affect the acquisition, only what we must assume when we test.

(2) Information concerning the controversy over verbosity, i.e. what can we tell about children from what they say and the amount they say. This will force the future teacher to utilize what is known about culture and dialect in making judgments and predictions concerning a child's ability, taking into account whether the child was brought up to

> believe that children were to be seen and not heard, or brought up to not talk to strangers (including teachers), or convinced by previous teachers that his or her speech was inferior.

An incident a well known sociolinguist tells about his work with children sums up the importance of teaching future teachers about culture and dialect: While he was testing a child's language, he asked that child to tell what she had for breakfast. The child didn't respond. The conclusion might then have been that the child was non-verbal. But upon further analysis he discovered that in that child's culture, breakfast didn't exist. So she couldn't respond. Any attempts to teach reading in which breakfast was used as a concept would fail, not because of the student, but because the teacher didn't know the culture. And, if you don't know the culture, it's very hard to know the dialect. And if you don't know the culture or the dialect, it's nearly impossible to teach.